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Local News

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'Built by the community for the community'

Franklin dedicates new center

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FRANKLIN - When Congressman Jim Ryun visited Franklin after the May 4, 2003 tornado, he was impressed by two things - the devastation of the community and the spirit of its residents.

"I saw debris all over, power lines down, washing machines out in the street," Ryun said. "What I did not see was people overcome with despair. Everyone was coming together and clearing debris, working to rebuild."

On Sunday the community marked a milestone in its recovery from the storm, with dedication ceremonies for the new Franklin Community Center. This time the weather was good.

"Three days last week they were predicting rain for today," said Dianna Morrison, who will serve as community center chairman. "But instead it's just beautiful. God is smiling on us."

Ribbon cutting was held at 2 p.m., hosted by the Pittsburg Area Chamber of Commerce. Cutting the ribbon were Ryun, Matthew Wendt, chairman of the Chamber board of directors, and Chuck Banks, state director of USDA Rural Development.

Following the cutting was a release of 217 balloons, representing the 217 families living in Franklin at the time of the tornado. (continued)



Laurie Sisk/The Morning Sun

Dedication ceremonies were held Sunday for the new Franklin Community Center. The old center was destroyed May 4, 2003, by a tornado that devastated much of the community. Cutting the ribbon at the entrance of the new center were, from left, Congressman Jim Ryun, Matthew Wendt, chairman of the Pittsburg Area Chamber of Commerce board of directors, and Chuck Banks, state director of USDA Rural Development.

"I asked someone how many of those 217 families were still living in the Franklin area, and 204 of them are still here," Ryun said. "That's such a tribute to the resilience of this community."

The Toschi/Pitts family ran the bell at the community center sign. The bell was formerly in the old St. Philip Neri Catholic Church. It and other historic items from the church were donated to the new center by the family, which owned the now-demolished church.

"It was such a wonderful feeling to ring that bell," Candy Toschi Pitts said. "They voted on who would get to ring it, and I was so honored that they selected my family."

The crowd then moved into the new center for the formal dedication, with Ted Wynn, chairman of the Community Center Committee, serving as master of ceremonies.

"It says in God's word that there is a time for tearing down and a time for building up," Wynn said. "We've have experienced the tearing down, and now we're experiencing the building up."

Wynn thanked Joe Cukjati, chairman of the center building committee, and Henry Ashbacher and Norine Laird who also served on the committee.

He also introduced his own committee, including Laird, Margaret Kennedy, Veda Maxwell, Tammy Wayman, Alice Baldwin, Frances O'Blak and Morrison.

Wynn also read letters from Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius and Sen. Sam Brownback, who were unable to attend the dedication.

"Congratulations to all of you," Ryan said. "This day is about you and what a community can do to overcome adversity."

USDA Rural Development provided some of the funding for the center, along with FEMA, insurance money and donations.

"USDA Rural Development works on a lot of projects across Kansas, but usually we help upgrade facilities such as community centers," Banks said. "You had a tremendous loss here. We look forward to working with the Franklin community on other projects in the future."

Wynn noted that the old Franklin Community Hall was the location for many family reunions, birthday parties, holiday celebrations, church activities and wedding receptions.

"We hope to continue that tradition, and we have plans to offer activities for seniors and youth, which we hope will become monthly events," Wynn said. "This truly is a community center, built by the community for the community, and it will serve with beauty and efficiency."

Finally, Wynn dedicated the center "to those who have made Franklin their home through the years and to those who were directly affected by the tornado. We dedicate this to the angels without halos or wings who carried us on their shoulders to see this project through, and to our loving God who has wonderfully blessed this community."